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ABSTRACT

A survey investigated the increasing preference for Alemannic Swiss German over standard German in public functions in Switzerland, particularly in light of Switzerland's decision in 1996 not to join the European Union, which suggests an emphasis on national independence. The history of Alemannic Swiss usage and language policy are briefly chronicled, and the methodology of the survey is described. It elicited information on attitudes about language use within the private environment (with family, friends, and pastor and in prayer and dreams), speech communication habits in daily public life, and background data, including opinion concerning acceptance of Alemannic Swiss as an official language. Analysis of responses from 102 individuals indicate an almost exclusive use of Alemannic Swiss in all speech domains regardless of the speaker's age, gender, or social status. However, less than half of the adults surveyed would approve of Alemannic Swiss as an official language, and those opposed gave a variety of reasons. Implications for public policy are discussed briefly. Contains 28 references. (MSE)

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Switzerland's Language Policy and the European Union

by Ursula M. Erdmann

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SWISS-GERMAN VERSUS STANDARD GERMAN:
Switzerland's Language Policy and the European Union

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Switzerland is currently working towards re-identifying its place in the new and changing reality of a united Europe. This study has tried to investigate the sociolinguistic impact of ongoing political changes in Europe on the use of Alemannic Swiss in German Switzerland.

The cultural and linguistic pluralism in Switzerland could serve as a model for the European nations that are currently forming the European Union. The unique historic and social background of Switzerland has created a society where the dominant culture respects the identities and rights of its linguistic minorities and provides educational opportunities for all speakers. Four different national and official languages co-exist within the political entity of Switzerland, a confederation of cantons.
At the census of 1990 - the latest available count - the country had a population of 6 750 500 encompassing

65% German speakers
18.4% French speakers
9.8% Italian speakers
0.8% Romansh speakers

and 6% speakers of other, non-national languages. (Gerner 1990:18) Swiss French, Italian, and Romansh speakers adhere in speech to their local dialects but, according to the informants in this

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study, to a lesser degree than the speakers of German who use their respective Alemannic Swiss dialect exclusively in all informal speech domains. The use of Standard German is limited to the official speech domains of federal government and administration, some higher courts, instructions in schools and universities and to some programs on TV and radio, e.g. national and international news. Local news, however, and discussions and entertainment are again mostly presented in Alemannic dialect. Alemannic Swiss is the language commonly known as Swiss German or "Schwizertütsch", a German dialect that is distinctly different in part of its lexicon, phonology, and morphology from Standard German which is the term for the German language of literacy and for the vernacular that is spoken in its colloquial varieties in Germany.

The use of Alemannic Swiss in everyday speech communication is differentiated by a great variety of sub-dialects that vary from town to town and valley to valley. However, these variations are - with a few exceptions - mutually intelligible to most speakers of Alemannic Swiss German. It can be stated that Alemannic Swiss is the first and thus the native language for all children in German Switzerland, regardless of socio-economic backgrounds, and that most children do not learn to speak Standard German, or "Written German " as it is callled, until they enter school at age six. For the majority Standard German takes the role of their second language. The ensuing diglossia has been amply studied and documented by C. A. Ferguson (1959), J.J. Gumperz (1969), D.H. Hymes (1972), W.G. Moulton (1962), H. Schiffman (1990) and others.

This empirical study has tried by means of a questionnaire to find some answers to the question of a continuously increasing social power of Alemannic Swiss German in public functions over Standard

German. Switzerland's decision by plebiscite in 1996 NOT to join the European Union as a member indicated an emphasis on national independence and a similar claim may be made for the increasing use of the national Alemannic vernacular in a growing number of public speech domains. It should be mentioned, however, that Switzerland is a full member of other international organizations:

OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development)
EFTA (European Free Trade Association)
GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade)
IMF (International Money Fund), and the European Council .

In his article *The Decline of Standard German* (1990) Roland Ris discusses the historic sociolinguistic background of Alemannic Swiss and points out that in the last two decades the language situation in Switzerland has undergone radical changes, so that there is much talk of Swiss linguistic problems, especially in economic and political fields, that call for a solution. Ris and others see a decisive shift in the formerly stable diglossia as Ferguson had described it (Ferguson 1959:336). Where Standard German had been the H-language then, and Alemannic Swiss the L-language, the roles of these two language varieties have now reversed themselves to the point where a movement to declare Alemannic Swiss the official German language has developed and is gaining momentum. It has been the intention of this study to examine this trend and to ask if the strengthening of the former L-language is in part an answer to socio-political developments in the countries of the European Union that surround Switzerland.

A quick historic review shows that toward the end of the 19th century colloquial Alemannic Swiss had been threatened in its existence. During a time of rapid industrialization many Germans from the "Reich" came to Switzerland's industrial centers. This shift in the population led to cultural and linguistic changes,

e.g. in cities like Zürich and Basel. As Ris sees it, "by around 1900 it looked as though 'German-German' would soon become the colloquial language of the Swiss cultural and economic 'upper classes' ... and would before long supplant the dialects...." (Ris 1990:4f.) But a countermovement developed against this trend of "infiltration by foreign elements" (Ris, 3f.) which gained momentum during and after World War I and even more so after World War II. German Swiss speakers clearly wanted to define their identity linguistically against speakers of German in Germany. At the same time, namely after World War II, a so-called "Mundartwelle", dialect wave, began to gain strength also in Germany. In Germany where dialect use had been looked upon as uneducated speech, similar to Switzerland by the end of the 19th century, colloquial dialect use is now regarded as a sign of cultural strength and a linguistic expression of one's regional identity. Thus, a move toward official use of Alemannic Swiss in Switzerland versus the official use of Standard German appears a possibility.

Switzerland is one of few countries whose language policy is anchored in its constitution of 1874. Article 116 of the Swiss Federal Constitution (1997), the so-called "language article", declares that "German, French, Italian, and Romansh are national languages of Switzerland. As official languages are declared German, French, Italian, and Romansh."(Author's translation of the original wording: Artikel 116: Das Deutsche, Französische, Italienische und Rätoromanische sind Nationalsprachen. Als Amtssprachen werden das Deutsche, Französische, Italienische und Rätoromanische erklärt.) The latter, Romansh, became official language only in 1996 when the majority of the Swiss voters accepted this revision of the language article by referendum. It has to be noted that the Swiss Federal Constitution differentiates

between national and official languages, a fact that was clearly stated before the 1996 revision when Romansh had only the status of national but not yet official language. National languages are those used for general speech communication by the population in the respective regions, whereas official languages are standardized versions admitted for use in parliamentary debate, for legal documentation and in the courts of law, for traffic control and other official busines, and for instruction in schools and universities. This precludes that the language of instruction in the Romandie is French, in German-Switzerland it is Standard German, the so-called "Written German" (Schriftdeutsch) etc. The differentiation between national and official language means for the colloquial use of German that any variety of Alemannic Swiss is the language of speech communication, whereas Standard German serves for communication in public or formal functions.

With this in mind I developed a questionnaire that addressed. two language domains:

1. The affective domain, encompassing language use in the private environment of family, friends, pastor, prayer, and in the language experienced in dreams. (Erdmann, 56)
2. The effective domain, encompassing speech communication in public life, e.g. the occupational area, traffic, the doctor's office, shopping, in public offices, contacts with German speaking visitors, strangers.(Erdmann,56) Questions on language preference regarding programs on TV or radio also applied to the effective domain, even if they are only concerned with passive competence.
3. In addition to the questions addressing speech domains the questionnaire elicits biographical data on regional background, occupation, age group, and gender. The final question on the form is: Would you welcome Alemannic Swiss a an official language? Please give reasons for your answer.

For a random population sample I relied on the assistance of colleagues and friends in Switzerland. Between 1993-96 the questionnaire with a letter of introduction was distributed in neighborhoods and in some public schools, where students had their parents fill it out. A shortened version of questions on the *effective* and *affective* domains for the young generation (age 8-18) was included. Of 120 questionnaires 72 were filled out and returned to me with additional 30 youth questionnaires, encompassing families of various social levels and of nine different regions: the cantons of Schaffhausen (6+3), Appenzell (5), St. Gallen (3+1), Graubünden (6+2), Luzern (9+4), Aargau (11+6), Zürich (21+8), Bern (9+6), and Wallis (2).

The elicited data point to an almost exclusive use of Alemannic Swiss in all speech domains, *affective* and *effective* alike, regardles of the speaker's gender, age or social status. In the sample population of 72 adults, ages 20-60, only five (6.9%) use Standard German for speech communication in their occupational fields: Two of these informants are secondary school teachers, two work in technical fields and one is an airtraffic controller. The teachers admitted, however, that the language predominantly used during discussions with students in class is Alemannic Swiss. The other 67 (93.1%) informants use the Alemannic vernacular exclusively even at their workplace. It must be noted, however, that no member of the legal profession is represented in the sample, but answers on contacts with law offices etc. indicate frequent use of Swiss dialect at least on a one to one basis. The total sample population also declares Alemannic Swiss to be the exclusive language of their dreams. The findings from the modified 30 youth questionnaires agree with those of the adult population. They differ, however, where the preference for language use on TV

and radio is concerned: The young generation prefers the general use of Alemannic Swiss, the adult generation is split in half, 49% (35) prefer to watch or listen to programs in Standard German and want to hear Alemannic only in local debates or in folkloristic entertainment. The other 51% (37) do not object to programs being predominantly in Alemannic, except for international news. The findings clearly show Alemannic Swiss as the dominant language in all speech communication and Standard German in the function of the written language, as one informant put it: "I speak and think in Swiss-German, but when I look at a book or a sheet of writing paper I automatically think in 'Written German'."

This statement could also be applied to communication with non-Swiss German speaking visitors, because the informants' answers exclusively indicate automatic switching to Standard German in the presence of non-Swiss German speakers.

The elicited data of this study indicate in 1996 for almost all speech functions dominance of Alemannic Swiss, the language that had been dubbed L-language by Ferguson in 1959 in contrast to the H-language Standard German. Although the latter continues to function as the written language, it seems to have lost most of its former speech domains in public life. Does this development over almost 40 years indicate decisive social changes in German Switzerland, and should Alemannic Swiss be standardized and become not only the national but also the official language of the largest speech community in Switzerland? This question was only asked of the adult population in this study of 72 participants, 40 female and 32 male. Of the total sample, 29 (40%) speakers, 25 male and 4 female, would approve of Swiss German as official language, whereas 43 (60%) speakers, 36 female and 7 male, reject this idea decisively. Their contrasting explanations can be analyzed as follows:

The PROPONENTS state that SG is left with only one speech domain, the institutional (e.g. university lectures) or formal (e.g. parliament) setting besides the written version. They claim that students of school age are intimidated by Standard German as the language of instruction, because it is not their native language, and they are consequently slowed in their learning progress. They further argue that they see themselves at a linguistic and thus social disadvantage when they have to use Standard German in communication with speakers from Germany for whom this is their everyday vernacular. In a united Europe, the proponents believe, the German Swiss might become politically and economically dominated by their bigger neighbor and should therefore clearly define themselves linguistically as independent from Germany. They fear that in a future more cohesive Europe their Swiss language will be neglected again, as it happened at the end of the 19th century. Their apprehension is supported by a negative reaction to

the latest edition ot the *DUDEN* (1996), the German language dictionary of binding authority for the recent spelling and grammar reform decreed by a tri-national commission on Standard German. The language reform will be mandatory in all schools in Austria, Germany and Switzerland beginning in Fall 1998. Although there are protests also in Germany, proponents for standardized Alemannic Swiss, nevertheless, see here an intention toward linguistic dominance of Standard German. The proponents' overall message is supported by an organization that works for the promotion of more political influence for Alemannic Swiss, the *Verein Schweizerdeutsch*. This association is engaged in a move for a popular referendum on the Swiss German language question with the concept of language as a national treasure that should be guarded by law.

The OPPONENTS against standardization of Alemannic Swiss are the slim majority in this sample. They give the following socio-political reasons for their position:

I. Standardization of Alemannic Swiss would create a serious language barrier within Switzerland and threaten the contact with speakers of the other national languages, thus threatening the very fabric of the Swiss Confederation. French or Italian speaking compatriots generally do not speak Alemannic dialects and have only sparce passive competence in them, if any at all. They learn Standard German which gives them access to the universities in German Switzerland and can also be applied outside of Switzerland.

II. Standardized Alemannic Swiss would have to be created. The opponents consider the cultural and linguistic independence of the cantons a serious obstacle to standardization, because the populations in the various cantons fear a loss or reduction of their individual dialect versions to a hybrid language. In order to defend their cultural and linguistic individuality the cantons may refer to the addenda of the newly approved language article

that give certain language guarantees: e.g.

--- the fundamental right to freedom of language

--- the common responsibility of the Federation and the Cantons to preserve threatened linguistic minorities in their traditional linguistic areas and to promote understanding and facilities for communication between the various linguistic communities.

Finally, the opponents argue, Alemannic Swiss as official language would alienate the German Swiss from the wider cultural and literary influence of the German speech area. The cultural tradition shared with the total German language area can only be continued when Alemannic Swiss speakers also fully master Standard German. This attitude is supported by Ris when he recommends that "the German Swiss [should] not shut himself in the cocoon of dialect and deny himself contact with other languages" (Ris 1990:5) be they French, Italian, or Standard German. It is worthwhile noticing that the majority of the male informants is pro standardization of Alemannic Swiss, whereas the majority of the female participants is against it. This result invites further investigation and discussion.

In conclusion I would like to stress that I consider this an ongoing study that should be continued with follow-up interviews and an extended population sample. Yet, the findings of the questionnaire indicate some serious support for a petition asking for a revised Swiss language policy that might consider standardizing Alemannic Swiss in order to stress Swiss German identity in case of future membership in the European Union. The findings also show that at this point in time the majority in this study is not afraid of Germany's linguistic dominance and takes an affirmative stand for Standard German as official language for German Switzerland. However, the rejection of membership in the

European Union in 1996 by the majority of the Swiss electorate may not only have happened for overt economic and political reasons but possibly for covert socio-linguistic reasons as well.

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